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World Chronicle

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UNITED NATIONS ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME (UNEP)

ELIZABETH DOWDESWELL, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), reflects on a wide range of issues concerning development and the environment. UNEP catalyses and coordinates all environmental activities undertaken within the United Nations system. It brings governments and the public sector together to discuss certain economic and environmental topics, and it helps developing countries deal with their environmental problems. It is important that women in third world countries play a major role in protecting the environment. Ms. Dowdeswell emphasizes the relationship between environment and sustainable development.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

There's no doubt that environment and economic development are closely linked, but the economic growth achieved during the last few decades has damaged our environment. Today, our soil is eroded, our forests are disappearing at an alarming rate, and our rivers and oceans as well as the air we breathe are polluted. What can be done to strike a balance between protection of the environment and our need for economic and social development?

Our guest today is in a unique position to reflect on international efforts to protect the global environment. She is Under-Secretary-General Elizabeth Dowdeswell, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme, or UNEP. Joining me to talk with Ms. Dowdeswell are Ian Steele of the Press Foundation of Asia and Judy Lessing of Radio New Zealand. Madame Under-Secretary-General, welcome to **World Chronicle**.

DOWDESWELL: Thank you.

LITTLEJOHNS: In a lecture that you delivered at Columbia University some time ago, it seemed to me that, although you declared yourself to tend to be an optimist, you are really quite pessimistic about the outlook for the environment. It seemed also to me that you were suggesting that economic forces, market forces, were in collision with people who are concerned about the environment, and the environment is losing. Is that right?

DOWDESWELL: I think you are quite correct. But I also believe that, if we can turn around our economic decision-making, it's also the answer to some of the problems we face. That is, after all, what sustainable development is supposed to be about, a linking of the environment and the economy.

LITTLEJOHNS: But were you in fact suggesting that large corporations really do not have much concern for the environment, that they just want things to go on their own sweet way, they think only in terms of millions of dollars and they're not prepared to make any sacrifices for the environment?

DOWDESWELL: No, not at all. In fact, some of the most successful stories we have are where business and industry have realized that sound environmental practices are also good for their bottom line. What I was suggesting is that the concept of sustainable development that so attracted the imaginations of industrialists and environmentalists alike needs to be monitored very carefully so that it doesn't become just a superficial covering for the same old practices in which we've been involved. I think we run the risk of deluding ourselves, and every once in a while I think the political legitimacy of that concept needs to be tested. Is it really

having an impact on the environment? Is it really changing people's quality of life? Is it really maximizing the potential of development?

LESSING: How do you turn things around? I mean, you talked about turning around economic thinking. How does UNEP help to do that?

DOWDESWELL: Let me give you a very concrete example. We have started extending our constituency beyond governments to work with the financial services sector. Some time ago, we released the first-ever global survey of banking and the environment, which we did in partnership with Salomon Incorporated, and I think that is the start of a conversation, a discussion with that sector of society that's so important to all of us. What interested me in the conversation was that it didn't stop at simply saying, lHow do we green our own operations? How do we reduce waste, improve our bottom line, improve our energy efficiency?k; they went on the to next stage to talk about the difficulties with credit risk liability, for example. But there were even some banks and certainly insurance companies who said, lHow do we look at our investment portfolios? How do we look at portfolios and investments that are really sustainable, rather than what we have been doing in the past?k That seems to me a remarkable shift in the thinking of that particular sector who say taking care of the environment is just good sound business practice.

STEELE: But weren't they looking at the bottom line rather than the environment, per se?

DOWDESWELL: Absolutely.

STEELE: The risk to themselves.

DOWDESWELL: Absolutely. But does it really matter, if they're incorporating sound environmental practices, whether their reason is altruistically for the sake of the environment or for their own bottom line? It's the end result in that case that's important.

LESSING: Is this sort of enlightened self interest?

STEELE: It just seems that way. I think less than 50 per cent had an environment policy, and of those that did have --

LITTLEJOHNS: 50 per cent of what, the banks?

STEELE: Of the bankers, the international bankers that were surveyed. And of those who were surveyed and said they did have a policy, almost all of them had developed that policy within only the last four years. So this is a very new and evolving thing. But were you surprised by any of the results? I mean, you seem to be enlightened and encouraged by it, but --

DOWDESWELL: Well, I'm encouraged by the fact that a significant sector of society is even talking about the issue. I mean, maybe I have very limited expectations, but I think it is important that we brought them to the table. I think it's particularly important that you're

going to see an initiative on behalf of the insurance sector, for example, where they are very strongly saying, lWe need to look at sound environmental practices, not just in what we do, but in terms of our lending policies, our insurance policies, in terms of our portfolio of investment.k That has the advantage of not just dealing with the short term but with the much longer term.

STEELE: How does UNEP help the international lending community? They were perplexed by the lack of clarity, the inconsistencies in environmental regulations, in developing countries in particular. Can you help to develop policies or put them in touch with people who can facilitate? Or do you look to facilitate business? What is your relationship beyond the survey and 50 questions?

DOWDESWELL: Well, I think we do a number of things. One of the most important attributes that UNEP has is its convening power, its ability to bring governments together, its ability to bring the private sector together. It was a surprise to me to find out in our recent meeting with the banks that many of them had never dealt with the banks in the public sector, for example, and this was an opportunity for them to come together. What they seemed to appreciate was the fact that someone was bringing them together around a specific topic and putting before them the latest thinking within the environmental movement on these issues, giving them the opportunity to have the dialogue and to bring them back together again and again to try and reach solutions.

STEELE: So there will be an ongoing process here?

DOWDESWELL: Yes. There is an advisory committee to me that actually thinks about where the sector wants to move next. I mentioned the financial services sector just because it's one of the more recent sectors in which we've been involved, but certainly our work with the manufacturing sector, with the chemical industry, is long-standing with our industry office in Paris.

LESSING: So how in fact do you do this work? How do you help major industries? I'm thinking -- you mentioned chemical, I mean, the chemical industry has an enormous problem disposing of some of the things that it's worked on. These are toxic wastes. How do you help them?

DOWDESWELL: Well, we do three things. The first and perhaps most important is what I call sensing the environment. If you wanted to know about the state of the world in environmental terms, you should be able to come to us and get a reasonable answer to that. So one of the things that we do is bring objective information to the table, be it for the chemical industry or for governments. The second thing we do is bring people together to solve problems. Sometimes it's through international negotiations, like a formal treaty; other times, it's just making sure that the chemical industry sits down with selected governments. And the third thing we do is to try and help developing countries to have the capacity with which to deal

with problems themselves, and that means helping them develop environmental law, helping them mobilize resources, helping them with training, for example.

LESSING: Do you find that developing countries are looking for this help? I mean, there is a suspicion in some parts of the world that if you take the question of forests, for example, that some developing countries don't want too much regulation, that they'd rather have the quick income that cutting down old growth forests brings and then deal with the environmental consequences somewhere down the road. Is that an unfair way of looking at some countries' policies?

DOWDESWELL: I think that countries certainly do have special interests, and they're very much linked to their economies and the state of development. But one of the things that I've also found is that most governments are concerned about the future of their people. And while they say we have to deal with our day-to-day concerns right now, they also don't reject out of hand the fact that their policies over the long term need to change. One of the things that we do is allow them the opportunity to learn. We bring information to the table, and we bring them together so that they can develop a global framework for taking some of these decisions.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Dowdeswell, we've been hearing a lot this year about the problems of Mexico, the financial and economic problems of Mexico. How is Mexico in the environmental area? Is it a relatively clean, green nation, or does it have a lot of problems that need attention?

DOWDESWELL: I think Mexico is an example of a number of countries around the world that are very quickly developing. They have problems that arise from urbanization, problems on account of infrastructure that is just incapable of coping with the fast population growth, be it transportation, energy use, air toxics, drinking water, whatever. But I think one of the very positive things about Mexico is that they have realized that they need to have a very solid environmental law and governance infrastructure if they're going to make any progress. I believe also the fact that they are part of the NAFTA agreement, with a commission on the environment as part of that agreement, will help them, in fact, to realize their wishes to become even better on the environmental question. Certainly if you visit Mexico City on some --

LITTLEJOHNS: The pollution is terrible.

DOWDESWELL: -- on some days, you can well understand the problems breathing.

LITTLEJOHNS: Your own country, Canada, of course, is also a member of NAFTA. What is Canada's record in the environmental area?

DOWDESWELL: Well, some people think Canada is a very rich resource, and it is. I'm very proud to be from Canada. But it also has its environmental problems. It has a lot of people in that fine border close to the US border; it is overpopulated in some urban areas; and

it relies very heavily on the fossil fuel industry, and consequently is going to be a contributor to global warming. I think --

LITTLEJOHNS: And of course there's also this acid rain problem.

DOWDESWELL: Acid rain is one of the examples of problems that, in fact, were tackled, based on some good sound science being brought to the table, and then both a combination of carrot and stick -- regulations, very important regulations, particularly in the Canada-US bilateral agreement -- to really achieve something very solid. But you know, I'm glad you mentioned that one because there's a wonderful example of a success story. We have industries who decided, when they were hit with potential regulation, to be a little more creative. And they went back to the drawing board, and what they ended up with was not only meeting new standards for sulphur dioxide, but they also cut back their energy costs, improved their bottom line, and had a technology available for global dissemination.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle**, and our guest is Under-Secretary-General Elizabeth Dowdeswell, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme.

STEELE: The United Nations is sponsoring its Fourth World Conference on Women later this year in Beijing, and I imagine that UNEP has a stake somewhere in that conference, in the preparations, in the relationship between poverty, women and the environment. What is the presentation that UNEP will be making on behalf of the environment and women, the relationship?

DOWDESWELL: We'll certainly be very much involved, and have been in the preparatory process, particularly in Africa, because our role in capacity-building, in helping countries to deal with some of these issues, surfaces when we help people prepare for conferences. For example, the role that women play is particularly important, not just because the world needs to avail itself of the talent of 50 per cent of the population, but particularly in terms of the environment. In countries like Africa, the natural resource management is very often in the hands of women. They are the ones who have to toil the fields, they are the ones who have to bring water, they are the ones who have to find sources for energy. They're also the culture-carriers. They're the ones who teach their children about environmental practices. So in almost every way you look at it, women become absolutely critical to sound environmental practices in the education of their offspring.

LITTLEJOHNS: How serious a problem is the dumping of nuclear wastes by nuclear powers who have such stuff to dump? And is UNEP addressing that question? Because it seems to me that these countries are eager to get the stuff as far away from their own borders as possible, and some developing countries are prepared to accept the consequences in order to make a few million dollars. Is this something that UNEP is taking an interest in?

DOWDESWELL: The issue of toxic waste more generally is very definitely --

LITTLEJOHNS: Not just nuclear waste.

DOWDESWELL: Not just nuclear waste, but toxic waste is very definitely one of our concerns. We do have an international treaty, the Basel Convention,* and most recently, in fact, governments took a decision to ban the transport of hazardous waste from OECD to non-OECD countries. That's a significant step forward. Because, as you say, even developing countries that have their own rules and regulations find that it is very difficult to implement them, faced with the possibility of significant revenue coming from abroad. That being said, the step of taking a political statement and turning it into reality becomes a very difficult one, and certainly we'll be having discussions with governments very shortly about the next stage. So how do we make this real? How do we make it happen?

LESSING: Could I ask you a bit about the relationship between UNEP, the central office, as it were, and all those conventions like the biodiversity convention, deforestation, climate change and so on, ozone and others? What is your relationship with those conventions and with the secretariats of the conventions?

DOWDESWELL: Well, in an administrative sense, we actually are the host for most of those conventions. And we provide the services to them. The policy decisions they take are, in fact, directed to them by the particular conference of parties, or the group of governments that actually ratify the convention. I think what is important to note, however, is that all of these conventions are related to each other. And so the synergy of discussion that needs to go on between biodiversity, climate change, oceans, deforestation, for example, is a particularly important one. UNEP's role as the conscience, if you like, is a very important one in making sure that world is acting in a coherent way to address environmental problems.

LESSING: And is it?

DOWDESWELL: It is trying.

STEELE: When you came from government to UNEP, just over 12 months ago, you vowed to do what I think you called lconstructive damagek to the status quo at UNEP. What did you mean by that, and have you achieved it? What's changed in the last 12 months?

DOWDESWELL: Well, I'd be the last person to say that I have achieved everything I want to achieve in my mandate. And certainly there are challenges that have come up that I would never have dreamt of. That being said, however, it is important for any organization after 20 years or more to say, lAre we still relevant? What is it that we're doing? Are we doing the right things?k And certainly with my coming, but more particularly in the post-UNCED period, it was very important for UNEP to ask itself, lWhat is it we should be doing,

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* The Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal, 1989.

and how should we be doing it?k For us as an organization, we did need to examine what it meant to bring the environmental component to the sustainable development table.

STEELE: When you went to the Rio Conference on Environment and Development, UNEP's position was fragile, to say the least, and people are still questioning its tenure, its hold on and its stake in the environment community. What did that conference in Rio do for UNEP, if anything? Did it strengthen your position? You've managed to accumulate the various treaties under your wing, but what else was achieved?

DOWDESWELL: I think chapter 38 of Agenda 21 in fact not only reaffirmed UNEP's mandate --

LITTLEJOHNS: This was the plan for the future of the environment?

DOWDESWELL: That's right. It's the shorthand for saying everything that needs to be done over the next decade or more. But essentially it reaffirmed UNEP's mandate as the authoritative voice on the environment within the UN system, and, in fact, it strengthened it. It mentioned some 18 or 20 specific things that were required to further enhance its mandate. I believe also that the fact that the Commission on Sustainable Development was created as a high level forum for political discussion should make us stronger. If we can find a way to keep before the world community the successes, or lack thereof, which we're having in implementing sustainable development, then that makes our role even more important.

STEELE: I was wondering whether you might talk a little more about the relationship with manufacturers. It's a very interesting one, or at least it was a lthem and usk relationship for most of UNEP's history. Is it still a lthem and usk relationship? Is it a cool or arm's length relationship? How would you characterize it, and where do you think it's going?

DOWDESWELL: I think it is not a lwe and themk relationship any longer. I think that happened around the world when the environment first came to be a force in governments. But I think one of the things that we have learned in UNEP is that it's so much better to have all of the players with us at the start of examining a problem and developing a solution than to bring them along afterwards. The best example we have is of the Montreal Protocol* on ozone, where industry was there helping us to develop the solutions. They became part of the solution, and I think that's one of the things that has allowed us to make such progress on that particular instrument. I think we need to do much more, not only with business and industry, but with the private sector at large and certainly with civil society at large.

STEELE: Is there a programme for UNEP and the manufacturing sector into the future?

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* The Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer, 1987.

DOWDESWELL: Yes, we have a very strong industry and environment programme that is located in Paris, and much of our work involves industry directly, be it averting environmental emergencies, for example, or be it doing some work on developing cleaner production techniques for the developing world. Very often we actually have people from industry working in our offices for six months or a year, certainly working with us on task forces. I'm very pleased with the relationship that has developed with the business community.

LESSING: Could I take you back for a moment to forests? I get the feeling, talking to some non-governmental organizations who are specifically interested in forests and biodiversity, that not enough attention is being paid to forests, that they've been sort of pushed to the side, partly for political reasons. I'm not quite sure why that should be the case. I mean, do you think that's a fair way of looking at things, that forests, central to biodiversity, are in a sense being shortchanged?

DOWDESWELL: I think that is the view of many NGOs, that forests have not been dealt with adequately. Certainly it is one of the sectors about which agreement could not be reached in Rio. But we have continued to keep it on the agenda. At the last meeting of the Conference of Parties to the Biodiversity Convention,* forests were very much discussed. No decision was taken because it wasn't officially on the agenda. But I think you'll see, for example, at the next Commission on Sustainable Development, forests will be very much a topic of conversation.

LITTLEJOHNS: So there's still hope for the spotted owl?

DOWDESWELL: There is indeed, there is indeed.

LITTLEJOHNS: To come back to the speech you made at Columbia University, you said, lWe are failing to reverse the tide for environmental destructionk; lWe're largely tinkering in the marginsk; and lWe are deluding ourselves.k I admit, I'm picking these sentences somewhat at random, and you might say that perhaps they're not entirely in context, but at the same time it seems to me that in that lecture you were considerably less optimistic than you have been on this programme. Why is that?

DOWDESWELL: Well, what I was trying to do was to raise a warning flag. And that is that I think to some degree we have been deluding ourselves because so many people felt comfortable with the phrase lsustainable developmentk. And I worry that we're treating it very superficially, that much of what we were doing before we're still doing, only we're calling it sustainable development and we feel good about the fact that we're doing something right. What I was saying was that I think we need to continue to challenge that concept, to challenge

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* The Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity, 1992.

its political legitimacy, and to really test it by the results it's achieving. Can we, two years after Rio, say that we have in fact improved the state of the environment? Have we really improved the quality of people's lives? Have we in fact maximized the potential of people and their development? And I think the evidence in two years is not as positive as we would like it to be. I believe in the concept of sustainable development, but I don't think we can afford to have it become a faEadethat we don't test.

LITTLEJOHNS: But you still think that the Earth Summit set in motion changes which have to some extent happened?

DOWDESWELL: Absolutely. The Earth Summit was critical in bringing about an awareness, a global awareness of the importance of the environment, of the linkage between environment and development and the economy, and of the real need for governments around the world to take action.

STEELE: Are you concerned about the third world agenda versus the industrialized world agenda? Do you see any narrowing of the gap in perception?

DOWDESWELL: Do you know, I think we do ourselves a disservice when we say there are these two categories of countries.

STEELE: Well, they expressed them quite separately and differently at Rio.

DOWDESWELL: Yes. But I think now what we're finding is that, if we look at issues like trade, for example, there are many discussions, disagreements and concerns not only between North and South, but between East and West among countries of the North, as well. Many of the environmental problems that we face are common problems. Problems brought about by urbanization reflect themselves both in the North and the South. What is different is that the South still needs to be able to attract resources, financial and technical.

LITTLEJOHNS: Madame Under-Secretary-General, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**. Our guest has been Under-Secretary-General Elizabeth Dowdeswell, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme. She was interviewed by Ian Steele of the Press Foundation of Asia and Judy Lessing of Radio New Zealand. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle.**

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